

FILE ONLY

Defector claims KGB plotted to murder pope

By Mark Thompson
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WASHINGTON — A former KGB agent who defected to the CIA a decade ago broke his silence Friday, giving his versions of a failed plot to kill the pope and another that succeeded in killing Pakistan's president and the U.S. ambassador there.

Victor Ivanovich Sheymov also said that the KGB had two sources in the State Department during the 1970s who supplied details of U.S. arms-control strategies and other policies.

Sheymov said the State Department sources supplied the KGB with "huge State Department documents, outlines of positions" on arms control and other matters. He did not describe them further.

The CIA and the State Department declined to comment on his statements.

Sheymov, with a background that reeks of James Bond but a demeanor closer to that of Woody Allen, told his spy tales in halting English with a heavy Russian accent at an unusual news conference.

Wearing heavy black-framed glasses and a bushy blond wig, Sheymov refused to detail his May 16, 1980, escape from the Soviet Union.

An American citizen since 1985, he demurred when pressed for details on how the CIA had extricated him from his homeland. "Very carefully," he said with a grin.

He said only that he blurred his tracks to befuddle the KGB and lead them to conclude his family had perished. "I didn't leave goodbye note," he said.

Now he is seeking a publisher for his memoirs, and handed out business cards bearing the name Victor Orlov, which he has used since he left the Soviet Union.

Sheymov was an expert in the agency's code-breaking and intelligence-gathering network when he

fled to the West. One Pentagon official said the defection of the 43-year old major was a "substantial coup" for the United States.

During a 1979 trip to Poland, Sheymov said he learned of a cable from KGB chief Yuri Andropov, later the head of state, to the KGB station there. "The task was to find out how to get physically close to the pope," Sheymov said, referring to Pope John Paul II, the first Polish pontiff of the Roman Catholic church.

"In the KGB slang, actually it was clearly understood that when you say get physically close to somebody there is only one reason to get physically close — to assassinate the person," he said. "Words like murder or assassination are never used."

When Mehmet Ali Agca shot and wounded the pope in 1981, "It was absolutely clear to me that was the follow-up of what had taken place earlier," Sheymov said. "I obviously cannot put up any documents to that effect, but I am quite sure it is, or at least the KGB is at the core of that."

The information he gave the CIA about the plot was too vague for the agency to act upon, Sheymov said, declining to criticize its reaction. Allegations of Soviet involvement in the plot have been made before, but no link to Moscow ever has been firmly established.

Similarly, Sheymov believes — but cannot prove — that the KGB was the catalyst for the 1988 plane crash that killed Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq and U.S. Ambassador Arnold Raphel. A Pakistani investigation concluded sabotage was the likely cause of the crash.

Sheymov believes the Soviets were angry when, shortly before his death, Zia refused new calls from the Soviets to help them quell unrest along their southern border

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near Pakistan. "My guess would be they pressed him one more time and he said no — and then it was given the go ahead," Sheymov said.

He said the KGB carried out few assassinations, preferring instead to contract such tasks to Department F of the KGB's First Chief Directorate.

Sheymov also warned against trusting Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, especially in light of his recent successful push to increase his own power.

"He still has a head, you know, but he's pretty much running out of brains," Sheymov said. "I don't recall any case in history when anybody consolidated power for the sake of increasing democracy in the country."

Sheymov, if he is to be believed, also dispelled some myths: The Soviets had nothing to do with the taking of the hostages in Iran in 1979, or the assassination of President John Kennedy. He is unaware of any role the KGB may have played in the fate of the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who saved 100,000 Hungarian Jews from being killed by the Nazis in 1944 before the Soviets took him prisoner.

The New York Times contributed to this report.